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ABSTRACT

This article explains that the phenomenological approach in counseling began as a movement to counterbalance the influence of psychoanalysis in psychotherapy and counseling. Phenomenology is defined as the study of the world as we immediately experience it, pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. Through dialogue, we grasp the essence or common meaning of co-constructed lived experience. The counselor's understanding of the client is a shared experience brought about through such dialogue. Counseling approaches as they relate to phenomenology are discussed, including transpersonal, person-centered, and existential counseling. The article concludes that phenomenology differs from both positivism and post-modernism because it emphasizes the subjective meaning of each individual and the essence of human lived experience. Recommendations are provided for counselors, including being cautiously aware of their influence on the interaction between client/participant and himself/herself. Also included is a discussion of the similarities between the counselor and researcher approach to phenomenology in focusing on the here and now meaningful experiences of participants. (Contains 11 references.) (JDM)

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Applications of phenomenology in transpersonal, person-centered, and existential counseling

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Introduction

Phenomenological inquiring about the meaning or essence of a lived experience began as an improvement of human inquiry about social reality. Unlike positivistic methodology focusing on the objectivity of the researcher with the assumption that we can obtain a truth "out there," phenomenology assumes that all descriptions are subjective because they are interpretations of the writer. According to Heidegger (1962), linguisticality and historicality are constitutive of being human. In other words, we cannot objectify language and history from ourselves because they are inseparable parts of our existence. It is the nature of the writer to interpret what he/she experiences through his/her language and history. As counselors, we believe that the experience of our clients transcends any positivistic explanations from a scientific and objective perspective.

The phenomenological approach began as a movement to counterbalance the influence of psychoanalysis in psychotherapy and counseling. We will discuss phenomenology in general before going on to its applications in counseling. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the similarities between transpersonal, person-centered and existential counseling and phenomenological research.

What is Phenomenology?

Van Manen (1990) defines phenomenology as follows, "phenomenology is the study of life world - the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it (Husserl, 1970; Schutz & Luckmann,

1973)." (p. 9) Rather than understanding what is going on through our previous experience and conceptualized ideas, we take refuge in the present moment (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992), experiencing it as it is in the here and now.

Merleau Ponty (1964) clarified that "phenomenology is neither mere particularity nor sheer universality. It is more complex even than a mixture of empiricism and idealism" (quoted in Van Manen, 1990, p.23). The experience we have is neither observable nor quantifiable as the empiricist assumes, the truth is not "out there" and not empirically proven. It also is not the idealistic truth "above there" in Plato's world of ideas or forms. Experience or reality is what we construct individually. As Rogers (1985) said, "we do not know and we cannot know the past, what we know is our present perception of the past" (audiorecording). For example, as a child walks away from his/her mother he/she may experience anxiety from separation or confidence in oneself. As the child recalls this experience later, the child cannot know precisely what was happening at that particular moment, he/she can only know this experience from his/her present perceptions of that experience.

Another construct of phenomenology is "verstehen" (understanding), the process by which we grasp intersubjective common meanings and symbolizing activities (Van Manen, 1990). Through dialogue, we can grasp the essence or common meaning of co-constructed lived experience. The counselor's understanding of the client then is a shared experience between the counselor and client as we will describe in detail later in person-centered counseling.

Husserl's (1970) notion of lebenswelt (the life world) emphasizes the world of experience as it is lived, felt, and understood by human beings. It is the world of immediate experience. This experience is natural and original, without being tainted by preconceived theoretical reflection (Van Manen, 1990). In the process of phenomenological research or counseling, we do not want to use a ready-made theory or our own conceptualizations to grasp the fresh lived experience of the participant/client. "Bracketing" is described as the act of suspending our ready-made assumptions and beliefs in what reality is in order to originally and directly perceive and experience the natural world as it is (Van Manen, 1990).

Applications of Phenomenology in Counseling

We will discuss three counseling approaches as they relate to phenomenology, including transpersonal, person-centered, and existential counseling.

Transpersonal Counseling

Transpersonal counseling, like phenomenological research, recognizes that below the surface of all different human experiences there is an essential experience beyond the personal level. "The word transpersonal .... has been defined as referring to states of consciousness beyond the customary ego boundaries and the ordinary limitations of time and space" (Grof, 1985; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, quoted in Wittine, 1989). (p. 269) This is similar to the construct of intersubjectivity in phenomenological research. Through intersubjectivity, we collect the uniqueness of each individual's attributes with the purpose of trying to find the essence of human conditions. Both transpersonal

counseling and phenomenological research recognize the uniqueness and differences on the individual level while also recognizing the universality or essence of human experiences.

In transpersonal counseling, the counselor facilitates the "...healing/growth that addresses all levels of the spectrum of identity - egoic, existential, and transpersonal" (Wittine, 1989). Egoic identity is the identity of oneself as a separate, distinct individual. Existential identity is the identity that is subject to the conditions of existence, such as being "... embodied, finite, free, and related" (Wittine, 1989) (p. 270). This is similar to Van Manen's (1990) statement, "There are four existentials....lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation". Transpersonal identity is described as, "The Self is pure transcendent consciousness, beyond all boundaries and all subject-object distinctions" (Wittine, 1989). The counselor facilitates awareness of each of these levels of identity in the client not through teaching but through assisting the client to uncover each identity from within. In the same manner, while aiming at grasping the universal human theme,

the phenomenological researcher does not guide or direct the participant as he/she shares lived experiences instead he/she "brackets" his/her viewpoint, carefully listening to what the participant says.

Person-centered Counseling

Similar to phenomenological research, person-centered counseling also emphasizes the possibility and the necessity of an intersubjective meaning between the counselor and the client through a relationship in which the client reveals his/her lived experiences and emotional difficulties to the counselor. To create such a therapeutic relationship, Rogers

(1951) proposed three attitudinal conditions namely, empathic understanding, unconditional acceptance, and genuineness. The counselor needs to listen to the client with his/her "third ear," meaning the former understands the latter's private world through intersubjective experience and/or empathy. In the process of empathizing with the client, Rogers (1951) recommends counselors not to intrude or actively intervene and to withhold his/her theorization of the client's experience. Empathic understanding is very similar to Husserl's notion of "bracketing" in phenomenology as mentioned by Van Manen (1990). This way of perceiving the meaning from the client and/or the participant is essential to understand lived experience without tainting through perceptions and the idiosyncratic viewpoint of the counselor and/or the researcher.

Unconditional acceptance is the second attitudinal condition in person-centered counseling. The counselor needs to make the distinction between the client's behaviors and/or difficulties and his/her personhood. As a person, the client is unconditionally accepted even though his/her behavior may be judged. A non-judgmental attitude is also an essential characteristic of the phenomenological researcher because it allows the researcher to enter the subjective world of the participant and freshly grasp the meaning of the participant's lived experience.

Genuineness is the third condition which stresses the transparency and sincerity of the counselor in contrast to the manipulation of techniques as done in other counseling approaches. When the counselor feels like disagreeing with the client's behavior, he/she needs to be genuine to express that feeling rather than superficially agreeing with the client's inappropriate behaviors. The counselor can share his/her disagreement in a

genuine but caring manner. A phenomenological researcher also displays genuiness as Merleau-Ponty (1962) says: " I try to give a direct description of my experience as it is, without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations of my experience" (p. vii).

Existential counseling

Existential counseling derived from phenomenological existentialism also employs phenomenological constructs i.e., mutual exploration, meaning, meaningful purpose in life, and universal meaningful themes (corporality, temporality, spatiality, relationality). Adopting the phenomenological approach, existential counselors reject the idea that there is an objective counseling model that can be used to explain the subjective experience of human beings. Like phenomenology, existential counseling starts with the importance of understanding the subjective reality of the client while stressing the commonality of human limitations and strengths.

Believing in phenomenology, Sartre (1956) asserts that existence precedes essence therefore, existential counselors do not believe that there is a pre-existing essence or theory that can explain the lived experience and/or existence of each client. Instead, he/she would see the counseling process as a mutual exploration in which their shared meaningful understanding could later be linked to the essence of humanity. Creating this authentic existential relationship between the counselor and the client is a therapeutic intervention in existential counseling.

Another important existential counseling intervention, self disclosure, aims at facilitating the client to see the universality of human limitations shared by the counselor. Through self-disclosures of the counselor, the client can re-focus on experiencing the here and now. This is similar to phenomenological research, which uses personal experience as a starting point before obtaining experiential descriptions from others (Van Manen 1990). Self-disclosure starts with the experience of the counselor before moving toward the client's lived experience.

Conclusion

Phenomenology differs from both positivism and post-modernism because it emphasizes the subjective meaning of each individual and the essence of human lived experience. Therefore, one of the conclusions we draw from phenomenology is that it rejects the idea of an objective, positivistic reality, at the same time, it also differs from the post-modern perspective in that it supports an essential, shared meaning among human beings.

Transpersonal, person-centered, and existential counseling share many similar constructs with phenomenology in regard to accessing the client's or participant's subjective world. To grasp the meaningful experience of the client/participant the phenomenological counselor/researcher should first be cautiously aware of their influence on the interaction between the client/participant and himself/herself. This can be done by "bracketing", "uncovering identity", "empathic understanding", and "self-disclosure". All the above counseling approaches emphasize the subjective significant experience of the client in the same way as phenomenology stresses the meaningful lived experience of

participants. The counselor facilitates the client to share his/her perceptual reality rather than imposes an objective reality (ready-made therapeutic model) upon the client. The counselor then, is similar to the phenomenological researcher in that both concentrate on being with the client/participant through focusing on the here and now meaningful experience.

In the counseling process, the client in transpersonal counseling, person-centered, and existential counseling plays a role which is as active and equal as the participant in phenomenological research.

In the above mentioned counseling approaches, the counselor and the client mutually explore the client's experience in an egalitarian relationship. In the same way, the phenomenological researcher considers the participant to be an equal partner in the research process. Both counselors and researchers sometimes even elevate the role of the client/participant as the owner/author of the meaningful experience under exploration.

The product of both counseling and research belongs to and is created by the client/participant with the facilitation and shared experience of the counselor/researcher. The purpose of both phenomenological counseling and research is to grasp the fresh experience of the client/participant, minimizing the influence of the counselor/researcher. However, in counseling the product belongs to the client while in research the product belongs to the participant, the research community, and the public. The process of both phenomenological counseling and research is exploring and open-ended without structured guidelines. However, in counseling the client dictates the exploration process, while in research the question is set by the researcher.

The philosophy underlying both the counseling approaches discussed here and phenomenological research aims at grasping the lived experience of the client/participant and the shared meaningful themes or essence of humanity.

Differences Among the Three Counseling Approaches

	Purpose	Client Concern	Intervention (process)
Transpersonal	healing/growth on all levels of identity	Growth	Facilitate awareness of each level of identity
Person-Centered	self-accept-ance, self-actualization	discrepancy b/w actual experience & ideal self	therapeutic relationship, genuineness, empathy, unconditional acceptance
Existential	finding meaningful purpose in life, acceptance of human limitations	boredom, death anxiety, existential anxiety	authentic I-Thou relationship, self-disclosure

Similarities Among the Three Counseling Approaches

	Purpose	Client Concern	Intervention (process)
Transpersonal	integration of self	determined by client (no diagnoses)	open-ended exploration
Person-Centered	integration of self	determined by client (no diagnoses)	open-ended exploration
Existential	integration of self	determined by client (no diagnoses)	open-ended exploration

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